Biographical interviews and imagined futures essay writing

Biographical Interviews and Imagined Futures Essay Writing: Users of Two Methods in Conversation.

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Abstract: This article reports on a conversation between users of two research methods, biographical interviews and imagined futures essay writing. A dialogue form is used to discuss these methods and their potential to be combined. The value of comparing research methods is discussed, and then the two methods are described and points of connection and contrast are explored. Although one method emphasises looking back while the other looks forward, the two have much in common, including the exercise of imagination, and discussion of individual agency and structural constraint. Both involve the construction of narratives that help understanding of people's lives as individual trajectories set in broader social and historical contexts. The two methods are quite different but complementary, and possibilities for their combination in one project are identified. The article ends by reflecting on the benefits and drawbacks of using dialogue to consider how research methods sit alongside each other.

Keywords: biographical interviews, imagined futures essays, dialogue

Introduction

Presenting approaches to research and their advantages and limitations may take various forms, including conversational forms. The book-length 'trialogue' about objectivity and subjectivity in social research engaged in by Letherby, Scott and Williams (2013) allowed them to compare and contrast rival perspectives and to

explore the potential for their synthesis; the participants also reported being taken on journeys from their different starting places to new vantage points. Dialogues between proponents of standpoints on particular issues similarly have potential to promote constructive discussion of researchers' trajectories and evolving methodological repertoires. Homan and Bulmer's (1982) dialogue about covert research exemplifies how the structured exchange of ideas and points of view can be fruitful, even if complete consensus is not reached. Becker and Geer's (1957) comparison of participant observation and interviews and the correspondence it generated (Trow 1957; Becker and Geer 1958) also has a dialogue form, albeit not one originally intended. Such exchanges are by no means bound to pit one approach against another in adversarial fashion. Significantly, Becker went on to warn against the 'very strong propensity of methodologists to preach a "right way" to do things' (1971, p. 4). These expressions of methodological pluralism have continuing relevance as 'sectarian methodological fights' (Lamont and Swidler 2014, p. 153) make an unwelcome reappearance.

In addition to promoting understanding of the foundations of different methodological approaches, dialogues between practitioners have the potential to facilitate the development and adoption of innovations by exploring the feasibility of novel combinations of methods. Certain combinations have become familiar with the advent of mixed methods research, for example surveys and interviews, but more adventurous mixed methods designs are being pursued, such as bringing together ethnography and experiments (Nettle 2015), or citizens' juries and surveys (Thompson *et al.* 2015). Recognising that many such fruitful pairings may await discovery, funding was secured to bring together a range of practitioners of different

but potentially complementary methods in a project entitled ‘When methods meet’ https://www.sgsss.ac.uk/training/methods-and-methodologies/when-methods-meet/

This article is the outcome of one of these conversations which brought together users of biographical interviews and imagined futures essay writing. These two methods were selected because they do not have a history of being combined but were adjudged to have the potential to generate insights and reflection as their differences and their complementarity are explored. The unfolding conversation reveals how researchers have distinctive, evolving relationships to the methods that they use, as they feel their way towards workable practices, and with experience become more adept practitioners. In places the conversation takes on some of the qualities of an interview, echoing the description of interviews as ‘a conversation with a purpose’ (Burgess 1984, p. 54) but in this case with participants sharing the interviewer role. There are confessional elements to the conversation in which difficulties encountered and mistakes made are noted, facilitated perhaps by the participants knowing each other and their confidence in each other’s company.

The two methods described

MA: Biographical interviewing is used to prompt interviewees to tell the story of their lives, or particular parts of them. There is more than one way of doing biographical interviewing, or life history interviewing; it is a broad church, with room for several different approaches. I tend to use life history interviews to look at how people understand and behave in the political world as they see it. In general terms, the method of life history interviewing focusses on how people tell stories about their lives. It is a broad church because some people think that you need to start at the

beginning and go to the end; others focus on a very specific time period in people's lives. I tend to go broadly over the whole life but focus on moments of political importance. There is again a variety of views about how structured the questions are, or even whether you should have questions at all. Speaking for myself, I always have semi-structured questions available. It is not necessary that you have to follow them mechanically and you certainly do not have to follow them in order or replicate precise wording, but I like to have a pretty good idea about where I want to go. But there are some people who really just ask one question and let it run from there.

GC: So this could be simply inviting someone to "Tell me about your life". Howard Becker (2014) recalled occasions when all that it had been necessary for the interviewer to ask was "How did you get to be here and what happened next?", and the person spoke about their life for an hour or more, simply with that prompt.

MA: The funny thing is I originally trained in moral psychology and moral development where it was very, very rigorous methodological training about what you could ask, how far out you could deviate from that, so when I went to do my PhD I swung the opposite way and opened interviews with very general questions such as, 'tell me about your life'. Soon I found that did not really work for me because people needed guidance about what was wanted in the interview. They have had many experiences, far too many to be covered in one conversation, so for me it has always been a question of finding the right balance given what it is that you are interested in, but really focussing on the stories that somebody tells about their life and trying to place that biography into the wider context of verifiable, historical events.

GC: The method that I am more used to working with is imagined futures essay writing where people, generally children or young people, are asked to imagine that

they are older and telling somebody about what has happened in their lives. So the focus is on what they are anticipating being the main things in their lives that they have yet to have. It has been used quite often around young people leaving education and entering the labour market, referred to as the transition from school to work. Ray Pahl (1978) used this method as part of his study of the Isle of Sheppey which was written up as *Divisions of Labour* (Pahl 1984), following Thelma Veness's (1962) *The School Leavers*, and Jennifer Williams asking young people in Sparkbrook to write about 'My life from leaving school till retirement' (Rex and Moore 1974, p. 233). Lesley Gow and Andrew McPherson's Scottish school leavers were similarly asked, amongst other things, to write about 'young persons' hopes and fears about the social world that awaits them' (1980, p. 5). The method has been used in other contexts too, so it can be younger children aged 11 talking about what they think their life will be like when they are 25; Jane Elliott (2010) has written about that. The method has also been used in classroom work with children on the autistic spectrum (Ellis 2016). And there is no reason why it could not be used in other contexts. So although I am now in my fifties I might well be asked how I imagine my future and the process of ageing. But it is a little different to what you are describing because it is a task that is given, an instruction to write an essay about what sorts of things someone thinks that in the future they will be telling people about what has happened in their life, something that is currently unknown. Furthermore, once the task has been set the essay writers are on their own, whereas interviews are interactive, both in terms of what interviewers say in response to what they are being told, and in terms of nods, facial expressions and other elements of body language.

Imagination in perceptions of the future and of the past

MA: We can come back to those differences, but already we can see some commonality between the two methods. Part of what I do is try to look at how people reimagine their pasts as well, and that can lead people to regard their present circumstances as having been at one time one of several possible alternatives. So it is really about a reimagining of the past, but also of course in terms of the political elements of people's trajectories it does very much also map onto reimagining a different kind of future as well.

GC: In thinking about imagining our futures we are necessarily talking about different things that might happen, all sorts of areas for different routes to be followed and unpredictability. Having read your book on how imagination is an integral part of narratives (Andrews 2014) I now appreciate that there is a closer affiliation between the two methods because people are looking back at their lives and thinking about not only what did happen but also what might have happened, and that involves an act of imagination.

MA: That is absolutely right, and one of the points I try to make in the beginning of the book is what kind of imagination I am talking about. Because imagination is often talked about as if it is just fanciful and does not bear a lot of connection to reason and indeed to reality. For me, imagination is something very different than this. Sartre uses the term 'the not yet real' to indicate something that has not happened, but which could. It is, he argues, the basis of our freedom, for without the ability to see life not only as it is, but as it might be, we are reduced to accepting the status quo. Of course there is always an element of fate, and clearly we cannot simply reimagine a future for ourselves and have it magically unfold before us. It takes, rather, a combination of imagination – and with this, agency – and also the good fortune to have the wind blowing at your back. I agree with David Hume, who once

said “Nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible”; for me it is completely mistaken to dismiss people’s imagination of their lives as unrealistic.

GC: In the essays one of the things that comes up as an issue when analysing them is how ‘realistic’ they are, and how fanciful or fantastic. In addition to the issue of whether accounts are ‘too optimistic’ there is the related question of how ‘honest’ (Gow and McPherson 1980, p. 10) the writers are. Williams declares her participants’ aspirations about their future housing ‘completely unrealistic’ (Rex and Moore 1974, p. 251) although their anticipated jobs were more in line with what she felt to be plausible. Pahl’s marginal notes on the 1978 essays that are archived at the University of Essex indicate that he detected some degree of fantasy, although in his article about the essays he was keen to cast doubt on the idea then popular that young people were routinely duped by magazines and other elements of popular culture that peddled romantic ideals. Of course, some accounts do envisage their authors becoming celebrities or millionaires, but although not all will do so, the fact that one or more may do so presents a challenge to researchers undertaking the analysis. Ambition can be a real enough phenomenon even if the odds are stacked against the realisation of that ambition, of those hoped-for dreams. And one gets an insight into how the authors of the essays think, how they understand the processes by which life unfolds, for example by gaining employment through the operation of family networks. Pahl’s later endorsement of the statement that in the labour market ‘it’s not what you know… but who you know”’ (1984, p. 298) indicates that this idea, at least, was not regarded as fanciful. Of course, as Veness (1962) points out, a good deal depends on whether the material being analysed is understood by the researcher as having captured ambition, aspiration or expectation, as these are not interchangeable concepts; aspiration allows more scope than expectation does for

imagining a life quite different to that of one's parents, for example. Some researchers investigating young people's views of the future have even asked them to identify their 'phantasy job' (Himmelweit *et al.* 1952, p. 166), which obviously allows freer rein to the exercise of imagination than the instruction to stay realistic.

MA: One thing which we have not touched on yet is that how and what we imagine always stems from our own viewpoint. Similar to Nagel's often quoted phrase 'there is no view from nowhere', Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis argue that the imagination, like all knowledge, is 'situated'. What can be imagined from a particular location is integrally tied to what can be known, and Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis demand that we 'account for the social positioning of the social agent' (2002, p. 321). Applying this concept to the research done on Sheppey, the young people imagined future lives based on what their lives at the time allowed them to see. Even if they produced fantasy visions, these were the fantasies of a teenager living on Sheppey in the 1970s, which might well be very different from the fantasies of current teenagers living in the same place. What is and is not 'fanciful' is not always as black and white as we might assume. The fact that we can imagine something is, in and of itself, an indicator that it is a thread which is connected to life as we currently see it.

GC: Imagination also has relevance to what people say about the role of chance in their lives as they unfold. An account of a life may well include not only what happened but some effort to explain why these things happened.

MA: Yes, and one of our challenges is to remember that what is now a 'present reality' was in the past only one of a number of alternative futures which could have panned out. And so the explanations of how we have reached this present are

invariably connected to our imaginations, as we return to a past and reconstruct in our mind's eye the other paths which life might have taken.

GC: As the young people are talking about what they think might happen in their lives there are all sorts of sudden changes, which reminds me of the game of snakes and ladders whereby you are playing, you have the board and you throw the dice and you land on one square and suddenly you are up two rows on the board and in some of the essays an example of a ladder would be, 'I was offered this fantastic job'. But in the Sheppey essays there are also bad things that happen in people's lives and that might be, 'and then out of nowhere illness struck my family', the sort of thing that is associated with what Michael Bury calls 'biographical disruption' (1997, p. 124ff). Veness was struck by how frequently in the essays 'the wife or husband is killed off… Of all the girls who mention marriage at all, 37 per cent report the deaths of their husbands' (1962, p. 33), more than a fifth of whom were written out of the authors' stories before reaching the age of 40. More generally, these narratives are full of points at which people announce, 'and then this happened', and that is interesting, the way in which these young people write about them, because they do just come out of nowhere in the story, there is no build up to it, they appear as chance developments, rather than things for which much of an explanation is given. Do you get the equivalent in your method?

MA: Well of course fate does play a role in life trajectories, and this is often acknowledged. But equally, people comment on the fact that something which they once felt had 'come out of the blue' (as it were) was, on reflection, perhaps not so surprising. This is related to the narrative imagination being not only critical in imagining our futures, but equally powerful when applied to retrospectively making sense of our pasts, and how we have arrived at this particular present. The metaphor

of snakes and ladders is applicable here, not so much in the sense that something comes like a bolt of lightning – though of course some life changes do – but more in the sense that the game is based on taking a series of steps. One travels towards a ladder, or a snake, one step at a time, and those steps are a person's everyday life. So yes, fate does intervene, but it interacts with and does not eliminate human agency.

GC: It is like the roll of the dice in a game, and if we think about where the elements of people's stories come from, perhaps all those games that we play as children feed into this process of how we make sense of our lives, including the role of chance and the related idea of probability or likelihood. The sequence of squares on a board suggests that there is a standard, normal rate of progression that can be speeded up by a ladder or slowed down by a snake, so this helps to highlight the point made about the experience of time not always being smooth and linear. There are turning points where trajectories change, sometimes dramatically.

MA: For me, I have always been very taken with the Aldous Huxley quote, 'Experience is not what happens to a man. It is what a man does with what happens to him' (Huxley 1932, p. 5). The people who tend to be part of my studies are working within very well-thought-out political frameworks. Perhaps I do not spend enough time talking with them about fate. What is always clear for me is that as political activists, they think strategically about the present, and about how best to get from here to a hoped for imagined future. The guiding framework for my research is one which allows for the role of fate, but which nonetheless over time moves in a more or less predictable way.

GC: I suppose that social theorists interested in the issue of structure and agency might find both our methods having a tendency to encourage accounts of lives that

emphasise individual agency. Not only is the invitation to an individual to tell the story of his or her life likely to encourage narratives that frame sequences of events in terms of that person's individual intentions and actions (rather than these things being understood as the working out of structural forces), it is also the case that narrators will be mindful of the disapproval that awaits narrators whose stories blame other people or circumstances for what has happened in their lives. Sympathetic audiences are difficult to find for hard-luck stories in which the individuals appear to bear no responsibility for the negative outcomes that befall them, however much this may fit with structural analyses of macro-level forces over which an individual can exercise very little control.

This point about the predisposition of narrators to agency rather than structure in their accounts is somewhat at odds with researchers who take people's family background to be the reference point for what they might realistically achieve. Williams's comment that she found her participants' housing aspirations unrealistic implies that more of the young people were expected to remain living in Sparkbrook than they themselves envisaged; the migration from inner-city Birmingham to the countryside or the seaside about which they wrote was treated as 'unobtainable by the majority' (Rex and Moore 1974, p. 251), even though the study was conducted in a period when upward social mobility over generations was the norm. Younger generations to-day are facing the prospect of being worse off than their parents, but the 1960's was a very different context to this. So this suggests that while narrators may overestimate agency and underestimate structure, for researchers the danger may lie in underestimating the power of people to change their situation.

The usefulness of methods: contextualised understandings of the social world

GC: If someone asked you about your method, ‘What is it that you are trying to get at in using this method?’, would it be something along the lines of what Elliott has said about these imagined futures essays, which is that they provide insights into people’s understandings of the social world and their place within it (Elliott 2010, p. 1082)? In other words, are these essays a way of getting to see the world from the point of view of the people that we are asking to write essays, or in your case be interviewed?

MA: That is a quote that could absolutely be said to describe my work as well. I think that it is a wonderful prism from which to try to understand wider social questions. But I am never personally interested in an individual life just as an individual life. I am interested in how lives are made up of numerous small elements which have to be put together for the whole to make sense.

GC: I suppose in your interviews you find people bringing out photographs, or bringing out little objects and saying, ‘here is my bit of the Berlin Wall’, or whatever it is, and explaining how this has significance by placing it in its proper context.

MA: That is absolutely right and one of the things that is difficult is, you do not always know when you first see something what the message is there. Sometimes the wider significance takes time to become apparent, and that is one reason why some people conduct life history interviews by going back to respondents several times, so that they can clarify points that have come up in an earlier interview, and that the interviewer has reflected (having undertaken an initial analysis of the material) warrants further discussion.

GC: We have found that with the essays, sometimes elements of what is written makes sense only when people with ‘local knowledge’ of the area have pointed it out

to us. For example, on Sheppey there is an established tradition of people building their own houses, and once this had been pointed out to us the essays that had their authors doing this could be understood in this context. It is worth mentioning here that this is an advantage that collecting essays from children or young people in one area has over essays solicited from participants in a national cohort such as the National Child Development Study that was a random sample drawn from across Britain that Elliott (2010) studied. So there are disadvantages as well as benefits to representative samples.

MA: My research has always tended to be less about place and more about a specific political trajectory (be that in the United States, East Germany, South Africa or Britain). What this means in terms of who I select as participants is that my decisions are very purposeful, in other words person X meets these various criteria, and so I will invite them to be part of this study. I can learn about people through a wide range of sources, including perhaps most helpfully fellow activists, but also other channels such as social media, archives and sources of news. My appeal to someone to participate in my research is always a personal one built upon the particulars of their lives.

GC: And in this context I am thinking perhaps one difference between our methods is that we have looked at these essays and we are talking about each time collecting over one hundred, enough to be able to put some figures onto some things and to say that in 1978 this many of the essay writers talked about going to university or getting married and in 2009-10 this many did, and although they are not representative statistics, because it is not a representative sample, it is something that you can quantify (Lyon and Crow 2012; Lyon *et al*. 2012). If everybody is telling

you such distinctive individual stories, it is probably much harder for you to see any way in which numbers might come into your analysis.

MA: Trying to make sense of the wide range of conversations that I have heard in terms of numbers actually depletes them of what really gives them their meaning. It is not that you could not do it, I just do not think that would be the best way to do it. That is not only because my research involves working with smaller numbers than those you have worked with, though that would be a further reason for me not to quantify.

GC: And do you think that looking for data about equivalent variables (such as about educational history or marital status) in everybody's story would be going beyond what is warranted in biographical interviews?

MA: It is important that people feel able to express themselves in terms that make sense to them, are real to them. But getting at this does require active involvement by the researcher. What is true is that any situation that I would go into to interview people, I would have spent a lot of time educating myself about the wider historical context. I do not want people to feel that I have just come in and have not taken the time to do my homework, as it were.

GC: And I can imagine that in biographical interviews there would be the same challenge as we found with the imagined futures essays, that what people say or write does not always give enough detail to be sure how to classify them. For example, we were interested in young people's anticipation of being geographically mobile, but on the basis of what they wrote it was not always clear when people mentioned another place whether they were imagining going there to live and work or simply as visitors.

But whether or not we quantify, these are both methods that give us a window onto how people think, and that can be surprising. An example of that from the essays was the way that some of them talked about age. This made me very aware that sixteen-year-olds have a very different view of what it is like to be my age. One young person was giving their narrative of what they imagined would be going to happen in their lives, and the gist of what was written was 'Then I reached fifty and I was old and my life was over and I went into an old folks' home', and as I read that essay I thought 'this is wrong on so many levels!' But it also reminded me that the world does look very different when you are sixteen. A sixteen year old would need to step outside of their immediate circumstances to realise that life is not over when you reach fifty, in order to get a better understanding of this thing that is for them really in the distance. When people ask, 'what's the practical value of getting young people to write their imagined futures?', my answer would be that it reminds us that the world looks very different to sixteen-year-olds than it does to fifty-somethings. I would also say that they remind us that the world looks very different to young men and young women, which is consistent with other research showing that young people's views of the future are gendered (Brannen and Nilsen 2002). What would your answer be to, what's the practical value?

MA: One of the things I am very interested in is intergenerational communication. This is not only how we look at our future selves and also people who are older than us but how we integrate our ideas of who we have been, as well. There is a huge strength to be drawn from this intergenerational communication. It is not just about getting a sense of how people see and understand the political world but it is also getting a sense of history and a sense of future, cross-generational binding but also

through time, so to me that is a deeply hopeful trajectory. It is about the two-way movement of time.

GC: An interesting counter to the sixteen-year-olds regarding people of fifty as 'old' is the finding by oral historians that their interviewees 'almost unanimously did not think of themselves as old', and this was a group with ages ranged between 58 and 86! One eighty-year-old woman in that study remarked 'Children probably think I'm an old lady, and when you're forty anyone of eighty is old' (Thompson *et al*. 1991, pp. 108, 110). Older people can help younger people to get a different sense of perspective, and of course it is also important that older people are reminded about what it was like to be young.

MA: I am not sure I entirely agree with that argument. When there is a powerful negative stereotype about a group, in this case old people, it is not surprising that when someone 'joins' this group by the sheer fact of ageing, that they distance themselves from the targeted group. Thus exclamations by my nearly 90 year old mother-in-law about 'old people' – from whom she clearly distanced herself – should not be taken at face value. I once wrote an article on this (Andrews 1999) in which I argued that there is a strong social pressure for people, including old people, to be seen as young, or younger than they actually are. This produces a kind of internalised ageism, whereby society redefines old age in exclusively negative terms, and where those limitations do not exist, the person's age is effectively denied, represented in sayings like 'forty is the new thirty' and so on (see also Andrews 2017-18).

Bringing the two methods together

GC: Going back to the issue of the difference of format that was mentioned earlier, the question of intended audiences is quite revealing. On the face of it biographical interviews involve the interviewer being presented with a narrative by an interviewee, whereas the audience for imagined futures essay writers is less clear. Young people imagining themselves older and telling the story of their lives to a future audience is an obvious fiction required simply to facilitate the writing process, but while the reality of writing for the researcher is evident enough, the researcher is only an intermediary and wider audiences may be envisaged.

MA: But here, too, there are similarities. Yes it's true that at one level the interviewer is the obvious audience for the tale being told. But what has become clear many times for me is that I am not the only, and often not even the most important audience. Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson (2004) use the term 'ghostly audiences' to indicate the impact of those who are not physically present and yet to whom, and sometimes about whom, the story is being told. With elaborated life histories, especially when people are looking back over a long life, they may well be recounting a version of the life they have lived for posterity's sake. On one occasion when I had completed a life history over the course of several years with one woman, we stood in her home, she with the hundreds of pages of transcripts from our conversations in her hands. "These" she told me, "are the answers to the questions my own daughter never asked me." I was not surprised to learn later that she had made copies of all the transcripts and given them to her children and their children. It is not far fetched, I believe, to think that they were very much part of her imagined audience as she told me the stories of her long and rich life.

GC: Gow and McPherson had one writer use the formulation 'Tell them from me' (1980, p. 12), and discussed various categories of people who could have been

'them': not only the researcher, but teachers, educational support services, family members, and peers. In one way the exercise may be understood as people speaking to themselves, with the account being a record of a process of reflection that may not have been undertaken previously. Their comment that 'had the accounts been collected in some other way… a different picture might have emerged' is followed by recognition that the essay form leaves them 'frustrated on occasion, wishing to probe more, to seek elaboration' (1980, p. 12). This is obviously something that interviews allow. However, from my own experience of interviewing, I am aware that I as an interviewer have not always given interviewees enough space to develop their narratives at their own pace and in their preferred direction, which is what the essay format is good at allowing. The same is true of inviting people to complete poems by asking them to continue from the simple given beginning 'I am'. These turn out to tap into aspects of people's thinking that interviews may not easily reach.

A related question raised by these investigations of people's narratives of their lives is where their aspirations come from. Some early research was framed in terms of the influences of home and school on aspirations, and speculated that the influence of mothers may be greater than that of fathers. Gow and McPherson's comment that our view of the world 'is shaped in many ways by the relatively few people we meet and know' (1980, p. 6) reinforces these earlier foci, which make no acknowledgement of role models in wider popular culture. Celebrity culture was a prominent theme of the Sheppey re-study (Lyon *et al*. 2012). Nor should we overlook historical figures. The community partner we work with on Sheppey (which is quite a deprived context, it is not an affluent area), Jenny Hurkett, really wants local young people to be proud of where they come from. Sheppey was a base of the early

aeroplane pioneers. Claude Brabazon responded to sceptics who said ‘Pigs might fly’ by taking a pig with him on a flight (Croydon 2006, p. 2). So the first pig to fly was on Sheppey, and this is an inspiring story about aspiration, ambition, and hope.

MA: There is a challenge in analysing the material generated through interviews because we cannot be sure that we have understood correctly what it is that they are trying to convey. We try to listen and we do our best, but we can only access part of someone’s experience, and we do not necessarily know what we are not hearing. Sometimes you will not be able to hear what people are actually trying to say to you because it is so far from things in your own experience to which you can connect it. One of the things about the student population that I teach is that they tend to come from very socially-excluded, marginalised places and they have a wealth of experience of things which are far away from the things that I grew up with and indeed that I have in my life. But if they realise that these life stories are of value themselves, and they bring them into the classroom, and those are the materials that we work with and teach with, it is a potential space of real excitement when they realise that their experiences and their stories that they come into the classroom with really matter, that they can count as something, and these experiences can form a very fertile basis from which to launch into their studies.

GC: A further challenge about how people express themselves that we encountered is that times move on, and how material was collected in the past does not necessarily suit the current generation. We were asking in 2009-10 young people to write an essay and they said, ‘what, on paper, with a pen? Why don’t we talk to the camera, why don’t we do Big Brother style, why are you so locked into old technology?’ Perhaps researchers need to be more imaginative about the ways in which imagined futures essays are collected.

MA: In a departmental meeting recently we were talking about our students and their actual futures. I suggested that possibly in the first term when they arrived there they should write a short piece about the person they hoped to become as a result of embarking on this trajectory.

GC: So if they imagined their future three years on at the start of their degree and then at the end of their degree looked back on that period then actually what we have got is our two methods being used by the same people. So our two methods have the potential to be used together creatively. This can be the case even if participants in a piece of research about their views of their futures are not aware that they may be contacted later on in their lives by researchers interested to know how far their expectations have been realised (O'Connor and Goodwin 2012).

MA: Yes, and I think that spending a concentrated period of time trying to think about imagining futures one can visualise a hoped for future but also a dreaded future. And so if we encourage our students and indeed ourselves to engage more in projecting their minds forward to imagine the lives they will want to look back on, the end result is more likely to be that we look back on a life or an experience that we find somehow approximating to satisfaction.

GC: You have got a discussion in your book about 'blueprints for successful ageing', and if we return to what is the value of these methods, the more we do these types of activities, interview people about their lives, encourage them to think about the future, then that can be a real practical benefit, because it helps us to get our bearings more in what can otherwise seem like a bewildering field of uncertainty about the future. We can say ageing does not have to be something that is all necessarily negative and things to be anxious about. There are lots of blueprints for

successful ageing. So these two methods speaking to each other, there is a little bit going on already but there is no reason why it cannot grow from this.

MA: Yes, I think that there will be lots of fruitful ways to put them more into active conversation.

GC: Well let's hope that this conversation continues.

Conclusion: an on-going conversation

Following the conversation the discussion has indeed continued, and broadened. Individually the participants have become aware of points of connection to wider debates, such as the earlier use of the imagery of 'snakes and ladders' to describe young people's transitions. In one of these publications the point is made that the imagery highlights not only individual biographies 'but also the way that the familiar social divisions and hierarchies of society are reproduced and repopulated' (MacDonald *et al*. 2001, 5.8; see also Johnston *et al.* 2000). Separately, the point about research methods continuing to evolve has been nicely illustrated by research in which parents imagine their children's future rather than their own (Livingstone and Blum-Ross 2018).

The conversation also prompted a return to some of the classic studies in the field to reflect on some of their details. Projects involving imagined futures essays varied not only in terms of the authors' ages and whether or not the samples were geographically concentrated but also in terms of the numbers of participants and their gender profile. Himmelweit *et al*.'s 624 participants were all boys (1952, p. 151), while Williams's 78 participants were predominantly female (Rex and Moore 1974, p. 244). Pahl's (1978) sample of 141 were predominantly male, as had been Veness's

(1962, p. 22) much larger sample of 1302. This variation between studies make it challenging to build a cumulative picture, but one notable feature appears to be girls' propensity to write their future husbands out of their stories at a young age that was noted above. Veness wondered if setting up a household and fathering the next generation was understood by these girls (either consciously or sub-consciously) as the primary purpose of husbands. In sometimes surprising ways, the essays show 'the understanding of the adult world' (Elliott 2010, p. 1087) that their authors have.

The review process of the article has also contributed to the on-going dialogue in various ways, including reference to the ethical challenges of returning in later life to follow up how imagined futures essay writers feel about how their lives have turned out, which is part of a larger debate about relationships with participants in longitudinal research, both quantitative and qualitative (Elliott 2013; Neale 2019). These debates include very real challenges relating to anonymization, but also the management of negative emotions such as disappointment and loss. Goodwin and O'Connor have commented that the young people interviewed about school to work transitions in the 1960's who were re-interviewed as they approached retirement are likely to have regarded their youthful optimism as 'misplaced' (2015, p. 127), although their anticipated retirements are also interpreted as characterised by 'fantasy and reality' (O'Connor and Goodwin 2014). The Leicester young worker re-study is particularly revealing about the potential for combining people's imagination of their futures and biographical interviews, albeit that their sample of interviewees is largely male and largely working-class.

A related issue highlighted by the review process concerns the potential atypicality of political activists on whom Andrews' research has focussed, since their strategic perspectives on their lives and their articulateness in describing them may produce overoptimistic expectations of the fruitfulness of biographical interviewing with other social groups. That said, Gow and McPherson's discussion of how their expectations of essay-writing being biased towards better-qualified school leavers were not confirmed is relevant. They found that the method not only allowed the voices of people on the fringes to be heard but that people whom the schooling system had arguably failed often wrote with more 'insight, vigour, expression and feeling', which could be attributed at least partially to their having 'reason to have strong feelings on the matters' (1980, p. 17). This suggests that even if biographical interviewing produces data of variable quality according to the social groups being researched, this will not necessarily work to the advantage of people with privileged characteristics.

The review process has served to remind us that a dialogue between two researchers will focus upon a narrower range of issues and perspectives than a debate to which a larger number of people contribute. That said, the dialogue form can still be argued to be more open than a conventional exposition of the case for adopting an approach to research that is typically found in research methods textbooks. The dialogue presented here has identified the possibility of biographical interviewing and imagined futures essay writing being combined, and has aired some of the concerns that prospective users may have about potential drawbacks relating to their different modes of capturing the social world. More positively, the dialogue generated unexpected synergies and points of connection, such as the

centrality of imagination to both methods. These methods have the potential for more extensive combination than the dialogue identified as already underway, and the dialogue will broaden further as more researchers pursue these possibilities.

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